Kumaraswami, Parvathi, and Antoni Kapcia. *Literary Culture in Cuba: Revolution, Nation-building, and the Book*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2012. 265 pp.

This book is a historical study of the role of literary culture (processes, institutions, policies, spaces, circuits) within the Cuban Revolution's nation-rebuilding project that began in 1959. Instead of the traditional route of studying specific authors and works, the authors reach their conclusions through documentary research and the information gathered by interviewing over one hundred members of the Cuban literary world from 2004 through 2011. The introduction argues that the revalorization of literary culture had a basis in pre-1959 Cuba, with the literary groups around the magazines *Orígenes* and *Ciclón*, as well as the group *Nuestro Tiempo*. The first five chapters are devoted to the exploration of the program to create a literary culture among the masses, focusing on key actors, periods, and spaces. Kumaraswami and Kapcia claim that despite the tensions and economic crises, there is evidence of a sustained vision for the production, distribution, and consumption of literature since 1959.

Chapter one provides the wider context of the evolution of the Cuban Revolution as a backdrop against which one can understand a parallel literary culture. Among several other landmark events, the authors mention Castro's *Palabras a los intelectuales* speech in 1961; the Final Resolution of the notorious 1971 Congress on Education and Culture, where homosexuality was condemned and art was defined as a weapon of the Revolution; the Lunes and Padilla affairs; and the 1971-76 *quinquenio gris*. In their view, these events should not determine the interpretation of this period, as "cultural policy was not always defined" (22). We learn that the letters of protest against the treatment of Padilla sent by European and Latin American intellectuals were seen by the Cuban government as cultural imperialism, which was "slavishly European in their thinking" (28). Then, Kumaraswami and Kapcia mention the creation of important institutions, such as the Instituto Cubano de Artes e Industrias Cinematográficas, Casa de las Américas, Ministerio de Educación, Centro de Estudios Martianos, and Casas de Cultura. Other events discussed are the debates about cultural authority between the *Nuestro Tiempo* and *Lunes* groups, the camps for misfits (such as religious or homosexual youth) held by the infamous Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción, and the Mariel exodus that encouraged some intellectuals and artists (including Arenas) to leave Cuba.

The second chapter articulates the theoretical approach of the book, which is based on cultural studies, Du Gay, Bourdieu, Appadurai, and Frow. It then proposes an alternative way to interpret Cuban literature and culture on the island since 1959 (the Cuban diaspora is excluded). According to the authors, despite the changing sociopolitical contexts, there has been an ideological continuum in the relationship between the individual and the state throughout the five decades of the Revolution. They also address the tension about the prioritization of political or aesthetic value. The chapter presents an overview of existing scholarship on Cuban literature since 1959, dismissing most of it as inadequate and simplistic. In their

view, it tends to focus either only on the moments of extreme conflict or on a supposedly all-powerful monolithic state, with the goal of showing evidence of the subjugation of art by socialist ideology. Incidentally, if the authors wanted to combat this purported stereotype, perhaps they should have chosen a different photo for the cover, where one can see a large photo of Castro at the entrance of a second-hand bookstore. They maintain that other books tend to assess Cuban literature using external paradigms (thus ignoring Cuban exceptionalism) and focusing on selected individual writers or on genres. Then, Kumaraswami and Kapcia sarcastically decry the "selective memory" of memoirs of exile that forget any sort of commitment to the Cuban system or the opportunities brought by the Revolution, to obey foreign publishers' demand for "readable narratives that reinforce the horrors of the Caribbean gulag" (40, 41).

The following three chapters analyze the evolution of Cuban literary culture from 1959 through 2011. Chapter three focuses on the redefinition of literary culture and on the search for an ideological consensus during the very significant first three years. According to the authors, "it was not the existence of a centralizing state which determined cultural development but the very absence of such an entity" (78). Ironically, almost every chapter in the book provides several examples of Castro's personal and direct involvement in Cuba's literary culture. The authors report, for example, that in 1960 the Imprenta Nacional published 100,000 copies of *Don Quixote* "reportedly reflecting Castro's own choice of iconic text" (68), and that when the *Lunes* group protested the ICAIC's open censorship, Castro himself was the first one, among other members of a panel, to respond, before *Lunes* was closed down. While this may seem an obvious case of state political censorship, Kumaraswami and Kapcia claim that the supposedly Eurocentric *Lunes* group had "lost direction and coherence" (74) and that the "victims" (in ironic quotation marks in the book) themselves have attributed the outcome to personal animosities and jealousy. In the next chapter, they reiterate this view: "the *Lunes* question was less one of censorship than an anachronistic adherence to increasingly meaningless approaches" (83).

Chapter four, the largest, with fifty pages, covers the next twenty-eight years, where a common strategy was followed, despite shifting the focus in different periods from the reader to the social context and then to the book itself. The authors conclude that the regulation of literature was not just a matter of control, but, rather of mechanisms for the promotion of literature. In 1965, we learn, Castro himself asked the University of Havana's Department of Philosophy to identify books for reproduction through international copyright infringement. They selected two hundred books, "only for Castro to suggest 500" (84). The chapter also discusses the creation of literary workshops, which helped develop a cultural citizenship, and of literary prizes, which provided new spaces for writers. Here, the authors may have underestimated how the bases of some of these literary awards created a series of aesthetic and political precepts. We also learn that in 1966, Castro demanded the centralization of publishing through the Instituto del Libro, which was given wide ministerial support "almost certainly because it was Castro's personal initiative" (96).

The fifth chapter turns to the 1989-94 crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which warranted excruciating adjustments and reduced the social value of the book. With the goal of recovering a lost readership, the figure of the cultural promoter was given a higher profile. The authors also point out that as a result of the economic crisis, new artisanal book production appeared, but the literary text also began to be conceived as a commodity. However, they argue that "heightened emphasis on the economic value of all activity within literary culture does not imply that its social and symbolic value have been abandoned" (171). The year 2000 saw a return to the principles of 1961 and the value of literature was given a boost with the ultimate goal of social integration.

The last chapters concentrate on more specific case studies. Chapter six, written by Meesah Nehru, discusses the vital importance of the *talleres* (literary workshops) of the 1970s and 80s for literary culture. The author acknowledges that they were condemned by some critics for being mechanisms of ideological indoctrination and for producing formulaic writing. The chapter also evaluates the importance of the writers' training workshop at the Centro Onelio Jorge Cardoso, which reflected a post-1991 new emphasis on infrastructure for aspiring professional writers. Nehru explores debates around the Centro, with its leaders acknowledging that it had both cultural and political objectives, and that they were trying to attract young people into the revolutionary project. In turn, chapter seven exposes the deficiencies of the library system in Cuba. Then, it delineates the history of the publication of one particular novel as a typical case within the context of the Cuban publishing infrastructure of 2008-11, revealing surprising pressures, negotiations, and delays provoked by political events tied directly to the Castro brothers: the publication of Castro's memoirs in 2009 in a print-run of 60,000 did not leave enough paper available to publish Ajón's novel; the following year, the massive publication of Raúl Castro's *lineamientos* caused an even worse shortage of paper. The important thing, Nehru argues, is that the novel by an unknown author from the provinces was eventually published, even if it saw a three-year delay. Finally, chapter eight studies the annual Havana International Book Fair (2000-11) as a microcosm of the prominence granted to literature, the book, and reading since 1959. The political dimension of the fair, however, is never hidden: "While the Feria may have been born out of the Elián González rallies, and while, until 2009, it was associated with the UJC (a mainstay of the *Batalla*), there is no evidence that it relies heavily on voluntary labour and mobilization" (221). And again, we learn that Castro himself chose the provincial locations where the international fair would take place.

In the conclusion, the authors insist on the idea of the individual-collective continuum and on the centrality of literary culture to the Cuban Revolution. It also denies again the notion that state-sponsored publishers were able to control writers through censorship and self-censorship, forcing many of them to go into exile; instead, the creation of a literary culture "provided a mechanism for commitment which was infinitely more effective than mere propaganda" (239). Overall, this well-researched book's goal seems to be proving that, despite the Heberto Padilla and Reinaldo Arenas affairs, the regulation and punishment inflicted on the *Lunes de Revolución* and Puente groups, and the *quinquenio gris* (these and other

cases are somewhat minimized in this study as a "contradiction" and as "passing moments" that have been unfairly seen as representative of the entire Revolution), the Cuban Revolution succeeded in creating the necessary infrastructure and environment for cultural expansion (with literature at its center). In a way, *Literary Culture in Cuba* can be considered an elaborate defense and celebration of the Revolution's cultural policies. It undoubtedly demonstrates the centrality of literary culture to the Revolution's national project of social liberation and provides a revealing overview of the cultural achievements and wars during the last five decades. Unfortunately, as stated above, several assessments on the absence of censorship, the limited influence of the state in cultural affairs and other issues seem to be immediately contradicted by the examples provided by the authors themselves. While in some passages they acknowledge the gravity of the *quinquenio gris*, the unfair marginalization, persecution, and *parametración* ("re-education") of several "troublesome" writers, and the excessive control of cultural production, in others they seem to be doing a juggling exercise of avoiding acknowledgement of the existence of censorship and self-censorship in Cuba. For example, right after claiming that criticism was given "a gatekeeping role, less for censorship than to ensure quality," they add, "The question of political awareness was, however, fundamental" (92). Finally, although this is, without a doubt, a comprehensive and detailed study, and the authors do mention the Revolution's re-valuation of Afro-Cuban culture, they never address the impact this had on the publication of specialized books on Afro-Cuban culture (or Sino-Cuban culture, for that matter).

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The political reality of a national literature has endured in Cuba, at home and abroad, past the point where in other nations it has entered a pampered cultural limbo. In Poland, for instance, after two centuries of internal ethnic fragmentation and alien partitions, the nation found its poet, nationalist playwright, and myth-making inventor in Adam Michiewicz (1798-1855). In order for him to *imperiously* invent a post-imperial nation, Michiewicz skipped the disintegration that ended the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the seventeenth century. Instead, he gave the unstable "Polish nation" her linguistic soul origins in medieval Lithuania—with its legions of shining warriors. This Polish medieval nationalist construct persists to this day latent in postmodern styles of cynicism. On his part, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-88) imagined cosmopolitan and civil-democratic Argentina imperiled by the rural charismatic *barbarism* described in his *Facundo*, a retro-medieval romantic book that argues for progress, crafted into a binary myth of urbane culture feasting on the sweat and blood of regional nationalisms. The experience of internal and external exile in Michiewicz and Sarmiento becomes distinctive of the political founder of national literatures since European romanticism.